



Bufs' goal on defense: Nowhere to run

Colorado coach focused on rush defense

By Kyle Ringo

Wednesday, August 19, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — A look at the box scores tells the tale. By the end of last season, it was obvious how to beat the Colorado Buffaloes.

Run the ball.

The Buffs ranked ninth in the Big 12 Conference and 86th in the country in rushing defense in 2008. They allowed 166.3 yards per game. CU gave up 21 rushing touchdowns and an average of 4.4 yards per carry.

Mouthwatering numbers for any opposing running back.

Coach Dan Hawkins lists good run defense among the common characteristics shared by most good football teams. When asked this week about his team's need for improvement in that area this season, he said it's the defensive statistic he looks at most.

"Ultimately, at the end of the day if you had to pick what you would be first in. I'd want to be first in run defense," he said. "That's what I want to be first in."

Hawkins' Buffs were first against the pass in the Big 12 last season, but he brushes off that statistic as probably being a product of teams having so much success on the ground.

CU took a serious step backward against the run last year at a time when it was loaded with experience in its defensive front. The Buffs had given up fewer than 130 yards a game on the ground in 2007 and were rewarded with a bowl game.

It's a new year, but many of the same Buffs are back on the defensive side of the ball, except along the defensive line where a lot of young and inexperienced players will be trying to shore things up this season.

That fact normally doesn't lend itself to improved rushing defense, but CU coaches have emphasized stopping the run this offseason more than ever before and they have implemented scheme changes they hope will help.

"That's been a big focus during the offseason and during camp is stopping the run," sophomore free safety Anthony Perkins said. "When it all comes down to it, stopping the run has just got to be your mindset. You've got to say, 'Hey, we're going to stop the run. We're going to make you beat us other ways, but we're not going to let you run the ball on us.'"

More than half of Colorado's opponents ran for 150 or more net yards last fall. The biggest day was predictable. It came against West Virginia, which was one of the least balanced offenses Colorado has faced in recent years. The Mountaineers were running the ball almost as much as Texas Tech passes it and they racked up 311 yards on the ground in an overtime loss to CU in Folsom Field.

It might have been that game that exposed the Buffs as being weak against a determined approach to rushing the ball. CU stopped its share of attempts for little or no gain but was susceptible to the big play. The Buffs gave up seven touchdown runs of 39 yards or more over the course of the year.

"Our guys just have to understand the offense a little better," defensive coordinator Ron Collins said. "We've got to get an extra guy down in the box somehow. In certain situations, we've got to get those guys to understand the run fits. It starts up front, controlling the line of scrimmage and then getting an extra defender down there to help make the tackle. But those guys have got to understand that stopping the run is a priority."

To drive that point home, CU coaches are teaching the gang-tackling mentality.

They have spent hours on the practice fields during spring ball and more this month yelling to defenders to get to the ball on every play. Defenders are expected to sprint across the field even when they are nowhere near the play and touch the ball carrier.

Senior cornerback Cha'pelle Brown said the Buffs have to be better against the run this year for the team to reach its goals. He said playing in a conference such as the Big 12 where most of the offenses are spread wide across the field, it's critical not to miss tackles, especially the one-on-one situations that occur when a player gets the ball in space, either on the run or through short passes.

"I think that's the biggest thing really in the Big 12 because it's so spread out," Brown said. "You might have good coverage but if the quarterback runs and you miss a tackle, it can go for 30 or 40 yards or maybe a touchdown. So the biggest thing is to make that first tackle or try to gang tackle and everybody get around the ball."



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Bufs will scrimmage at Regis High School on Thursday

Hawkins closes scrimmage to media

By Kyle Ringo
Tuesday, August 18, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — The Colorado Buffaloes are taking training came on the road. Well, for one day at least.

Coach Dan Hawkins announced today the Buffs will conduct the second scrimmage of fall camp on Thursday at Regis High School in Aurora. CU fans and media following the team are not invited.

“It’s closed to everybody,” Hawkins said.

Why Regis? Former CU assistant director of football operations, Mark Nolan, is now the head coach of the Raiders football program. Nolan played under Hawkins for two years at Willamette University and coached under Hawkins at the school as well. His desire to get back into coaching led him to leave CU for the prep ranks last winter.

It will be the first time the Colorado football team has left campus for a practice or scrimmage during spring or fall camp since 1999 when several practices were held at Boulder High School because the practice fields on campus had recently been seeded.

The last time the Buffs practiced outside Boulder County during spring or fall camp was a spring scrimmage held at All-City Stadium in Denver in the late 1980s, sports information director Dave Plati said.

Ticket count

CU athletic director Mike Bohn reported 8,437 tickets remained available for the season opener against Colorado State with about an hour left in the business day on Tuesday.

Bohn said he expects the game to sellout. He said sales are on a similar pace at this point with the last time the Buffs hosted CSU in Boulder to start the 2005 season.

Earlier this summer Bohn said the school had sold about 3,000 fewer season tickets than last year. He said that number continues to shrink as the season approaches.

Building unity

The Buffs were scheduled to go to Water World in Westminster on Tuesday afternoon, but lightning and

rain washed away those plans. The team went to a movie instead for the second “team unity function” of camp.

Hawkins said he has always believed in such trips because of the positive effect they have on the team and the program.

“I think that is just as important as everything else you do,” he said.

Hawkins also has continued to bring in guest speakers for his players this month. It is something he has done in the past as well. He refused to name any of the guests who have addressed the team so far this month, but posted on his Twitter page that former Colorado Rockies manager Clint Hurdle spoke to the Bufs on Sunday.

Hawkins said he believes his team is already a tight-knit group and it is getting closer all the time.

“Eventually, you need to be on the bus because there are too many other people on the bus and if you’re not on the bus, you stick out,” he said.

Notable

When asked after Tuesday’s practice where the quarterback helmet cams are this month, offensive coordinator Eric Kiesau said, “I don’t know. I think Mark took them to Oregon with him.” A reference to former offensive coordinator Mark Helfrich, who began using helmet cameras to help with the quarterback evaluation process in spring drills. Helfrich was hired as offensive coordinator at Oregon after spring practices at CU ended.



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CU's Kasa mulling redshirt

DE suffered partially torn MCL

By Kyle Ringo
Tuesday, August 18, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — Colorado freshman defensive end Nick Kasa might have to undergo surgery after a magnetic resonance imaging test revealed he suffered a partially torn medial collateral ligament on Monday during two-on-two pass-rushing drills.

Kasa said CU doctors and athletic trainers have told him to expect a 6-8 week recovery time, which could allow him to return prior to the beginning of conference play in early October.

“Right now, they don’t really know,” Kasa said. “It could heal itself or maybe not. We’re just going see what happens. Surgery could be an option or it could not be.”

He said he is not sure whether he wants to leave the door open to playing a shortened season or if he will redshirt.

Kasa said he never suffered a serious injury during his high school career in Broomfield at Legacy High School. He said he once had a bruised knee during his prep career and also dealt with a concussion at one point.

Kasa was the highest rated prep recruit in the 2009 CU recruiting class and was expected to play this season prior to the injury because the team has a lack of solid depth and talent on the defensive line. He had been feeling more and more positive about his chances of contributing this season.

“The last week I really started to catch on to things and started going good in practice,” Kasa said. “It’s definitely a pretty bad setback for me. I mean, I want to play. I think everybody wants to play, but I just have to take it in stride.”



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Woelk: True fullbacks a disappearing football species

By Neill Woelk

Wednesday, August 19, 2009

BOULDER, Colo. — Those of us old enough to remember when the word "retired" actually meant "I'm done playing" also remember a position called "fullback."

Big guy. Tough guy. More often than not did the dirty work while his more celebrated backfield mates reaped the glory. And, every once in a while, the coaches would throw him a bone. Let him carry the ball or maybe even catch a pass.

But mostly, they blocked. They led the way through the line, going head-to-head with linebackers, defensive tackles -- anyone that got in the way. Then they picked themselves up and did it again. And again. And again.

NFL Hall of Famer Larry Csonka was a fullback. Ditto for Marion Motley. Tom Rathman was a standout at Nebraska and later with the 49ers, and Oklahoma had a long list of brutes at the position.

Closer to home, the University of Colorado's best teams have almost always had solid fullbacks. Erich Kissick led the way for Eric Bieniemy and J.J. Flannigan in 1989, and George Hemingway helped open the holes a year later when the Buffs won a national title.

Then there were Gary Barnett's 2001-02 Buffs. Most fans have fond memories of those teams, particularly standout tailbacks Chris Brown and Bobby Purify. But the hard-core folks will also remember that it was Brandon Drumm who helped create the running room for CU's celebrated tailbacks.

Today, though, the fullback -- the true fullback -- is a disappearing breed.

Take a look at Colorado's roster this season, and you'll see just two players with "FB" alongside their names, Jake Behrens and Trace Adams. Both are seniors, meaning unless the Buffs recruit a fullback next year, or convert someone from a different position (Adams is a converted defensive back), the Buffs will enter next season without a true fullback.

"It's possible," acknowledged Buff head coach Dan Hawkins. "We're always open to recruiting one, but you've got to find the right guy."

There's more than a little irony in Hawk's statement. CU's head coach played fullback in college, and has an admitted affinity for the position.

But in a day and age when the spread offense reigns supreme, there's little room for nostalgia.

"You just look around, and most teams don't use a fullback anymore," Behrens said after Tuesday morning's practice. "Everyone's going to the spread, or some other offense that they don't need a fullback most of the time."

"But I'll tell you -- every team needs a fullback once in a while."

Indeed. In goal-line situations, a fullback is a virtual necessity, and teams that don't have a full-time fullback find themselves being creative when the need arises.

Over the last couple of years, when the New England Patriots needed a fullback in goal-line situations, they called upon linebacker Mike Vrabel. Other teams -- pro and college -- line up a tight end at the position. And, just last year, the Denver Broncos lined up Spencer Larsen at linebacker and fullback in the same game.

But the every-day fullback is slowly fading away.

"I've always liked it," Behrens said. "I know they're disappearing, but there are some good things about playing fullback."

Such as?

"Well, you get to go out and hit people as hard as you can, and you get a little bit of a running start," Behrens said with a grin. "When you've had a bad day, that's a great way to get it out of your system. Put the pads on and hit someone."

"Then, every once in a while, they let you actually touch the ball. That's the reward."

Hawkins won't rule out recruiting another fullback, but he also admitted that utilizing a tight end in certain situations is probably the future.

"When you do that, you create problems for the defense," he said. "Is that the tight end and is he going to split out, or is it the fullback?"

"We've been fortunate with Jake. He's a good blocker, he can catch the ball and he can even run a little bit."

Behrens did not have a single carry last season, but he did catch 12 passes for 75 yards and a pair of touchdowns. He'd like at least a similar taste of action in his senior season. The position might fade away, but the memories won't.

"I hope fullbacks stay around for a little while longer," Behrens said. "Someday, when I have kids, I want to be able to point out on the field and say, 'That's what I played.'"



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cu football

Kasa's injury "pretty bad setback"

By Tom Kensler
The Denver Post

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CU defensive end Nick Kasa, a former Legacy star, may have to redshirt this season because of a knee injury. (Hyoung Chang, The Denver Post)

BOULDER — Colorado freshman defensive end Nick Kasa, a former Legacy High School star and the Buffaloes' top signee in their 2009 recruiting class, confirmed Tuesday that the knee injury he suffered Monday is a torn MCL.

Kasa was told to expect six to eight weeks of

rehabilitation before returning to the field. Surgery is a possibility, Kasa said, but that likely will not be decided until the swelling subsides.

"It's definitely a pretty bad setback for me," Kasa told reporters Tuesday morning after watching practice with his left leg immobilized. "I want to play. I think everybody wants to play. I just have to take it in stride and do what I can to get back as fast as I can."

Unless the recovery time is much shorter than anticipated, it appears likely that the 6-foot-7, 260-pound Kasa will redshirt. That would be a shame, CU defensive ends coach Romeo Bandison said, because Kasa already had shown enough during August camp to be "in the mix" for playing time this fall.

Kasa said he will leave any decisions about redshirting to the coaches so they can decide what's best for the team.

"It depends on his return," Bandison said Tuesday. "If he gets back in two weeks, then you can make plans. But if it takes eight weeks . . . I don't see him wasting a season (of eligibility). I'd like to think we're not just going to play him for half a year, unless we have four D-linemen go down with injuries."

If Kasa redshirts, it would mark the second consecutive year that CU lost the state's No. 1 prospect before the season began. Last August, linebacker Jon Major suffered a torn ACL early in August camp and the former Ponderosa High School star underwent season-ending knee

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surgery. Kasa said MCL surgery would not necessarily put an end to his season.

"He's doing very well (emotionally)," Bandison said Tuesday. "Yesterday, he was bummed out. You could see it on his face. He was really upset. Today he was better. There's a smile back on his face. But I'm sure he's bummed because he was in the mix."

The injury occurred during a two-against-two pass rush drill when a guard blocking the other defensive player unintentionally rolled into Kasa's left side. Kasa said he didn't see it coming.

"The last week, I really started to catch on to things. Everything was going good in practice," Kasa said. "I've got to be out now, especially for CSU (in the Sept. 6 opener at Folsom Field). I really wanted to play in that game. I just have to stay positive."

Footnotes.

Following a morning practice, players and coaches were scheduled to spend Tuesday afternoon at Water World. CU coach Dan Hawkins calls it a "team unity" session. After Monday afternoon's practice, players tried to hit "home runs" with tennis balls and rackets. "I've always done stuff like that," Hawkins said. "I think that's as important as everything else you do. It's about the team. It's not about individuals. It's knowing the other guys, respecting the other guys, interacting with the other guys and have an appreciation for them." . . . Thursday's intrasquad

scrimmage will be at Regis High in Aurora, Hawkins said, and will be closed to the media and the public. The coach said he thought it would be good for the Buffs to travel and "get away from home."

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Tough decision for CU Kasa

By Patrick Ridgell
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BOULDER — Nick Kasa's left knee injury has left a lot of unanswered questions for the freshman defensive end and the Colorado football program.

What Kasa said he knew Tuesday was that he suffered a partially torn MCL in his left knee Monday during pass-rushing drills. He said he expects to be out six-to-eight weeks, but isn't sure if he'll need surgery. And as to whether it might be best for Kasa to recover in 2009 and begin anew in 2010, that's something to be determined, too.

Kasa was playing well enough to be "in the mix," according to defensive line coach Romeo Bandison. At 6-foot-7 and 267 pounds, Kasa has shown the physical strength to handle the position, and he arrived on campus already owning sprinter's speed.

CU is replacing three starters on the defensive line from 2008 and Kasa prominently figures into those plans. The decision whether to redshirt Kasa might be a tricky one.

"If he's back in two weeks, then we can make plans," Bandison said. "But if it takes eight weeks and we're halfway through the season, you know, we'll see how that goes.

"I don't see us having him play six weeks. ... I'd like to think we would not just play him for half the year unless we have four D-linemen go down and he absolutely wants to."

That kind of luck, which would smack of the misfortune CU suffered in 2008 when it lost 121 man games to injury or illness, has yet to rear itself this August. Last year, the Buffs lost a potential starting guard when Mike Iltis tore knee ligaments in a non-contact drill on the first day of camp. Later in camp, linebacker Jon Major, one of the state's top recruits, tore knee ligaments, ending his freshman year before it started.

But Kasa's injury is the most serious the Buffs have suffered this August. It came days after head coach Dan Hawkins stated publicly how fortunate the Buffs have been with their health so far. Kasa was the state's top recruit in 2008, turning down Florida to sign with CU. He said he has never been hurt like this, and now he's just trying to deal with it.

"I'm trying to stay positive, but I was really pissed (Monday)," Kasa said. "I have to be out now, especially for CSU; I really wanted to play in that game. I just have to stay positive. That's the only thing I can do about it now.

"The last week, I've really started to catch on to things and going good in practice. It's definitely a pretty bad setback. I want to play; I think everybody wants to play. But you have to take it in stride and get back as fast as I can."

Redshirting is a topic yet to be broached, Kasa said.

"I just have to see how long I'm out," he said. "The coaches are probably going to meet with me pretty soon and we'll talk about it, I guess. I don't really know right now."

Kasa said his left knee was "really stiff" and "really swollen" on Tuesday. He said the swelling must subside before a

decision for surgery can be reached. He said that would take a week to a week and a half.

Kasa also said surgery would not mean his season is over. He said the recovery time is about the same, whether he lets it heal naturally or has an operation. He said he can't do any cardiovascular work for a week or so, until his knee isn't so stiff.

Teammates said Kasa has already made an impression on the defense, and he'll be missed.

"He was looking good," defensive tackle Eugene Goree said. "He's a fast learner. We're going to miss him out there, but we just have to keep rolling."

Said senior linebacker Jeff Smart: "That's definitely going to hurt us. But he's a young guy and he has a good mindset, so he'll be able to attack his rehab and hopefully get back out here."

Bandison said he tried to leave Kasa alone Monday because he could see the frustration on his face. Bandison said a smile crossed Kasa's face Tuesday.

"We'll just have to see what happens," Kasa said.

EXTRA POINTS: Hawkins said CU will hold Thursday's scrimmage at Regis High School in Aurora. It will be closed to fans and media. He said the purpose for moving it off campus is "just to get away from home." ... CU reported nothing new on receiver Andre Simmons on Tuesday. ... The Buffs scheduled a team unity function at Water World for Tuesday afternoon. Rain forced the team to cancel it and go to the movies instead, CU sports information director Dave Plati reported. Hawkins said such field trips are "as important as everything else we do. It's about the team. It's about the individuals, knowing the other guys, respecting the other guys, interacting with the other guys, having an appreciation for them. When you can get your guys to care more about the successes of everybody else more than yours, then you have something special." Hawkins said he thinks his team is "pretty tight."

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